

The Political Use of Evaluations in Democratic Discourse: Enrichment or Exclusion?

Abstract

This article asks the question of how the political use of evaluations enriches democratic discourse. It builds on the results of a multi-year research project on the use of evaluations in direct-democratic debates in Switzerland in the fields of health and education. The results of quantitative and qualitative content analyses of documents related to 221 votes and a split-ballot survey show that the use of evaluations provides policy-relevant information and substantive justifications, leads to less normative arguments, and increases interactivity of discourse. However, evaluations are particularly used by elite actors in their argumentation, but also to receive information on policies. This leads to a separation of the arena of deliberation in an expert discourse that includes empirical evidence and a lay discourse that eschews empirical knowledge.

Keywords

Evaluation Use; Democratic Discourse; Direct-Democratic Campaigns

Introduction

Evidence-based policymaking – portrayed as the effort to implement policies based on ‘what works’ rather than based on ideology – has become an increasingly dominant discourse in recent years. At the same time, critics have argued that evidence-based policy making could lead to purely technocratic, undemocratic decision-making that does not sufficiently take into account the values and opinions of citizens (Biesta, 2007, Parsons, 2002, Sanderson, 2002). Evidence-based policymaking, so it is argued, eschews the normative and political ambiguities inherent to policymaking and devalues democratic debate by assuming that there are objective solutions to political problems.

More recently, the emphasis has shifted to how evidence is used in democratic discourse (Boswell, 2014, Pearce et al., 2014, Wesselink et al., 2014). This scholarship often adheres to an interpretive view to policymaking and argues that the use of evidence in policy discourse may lead to more reasoned debates and inform policymakers and citizens about the policy in question (Shulock, 1999, Valovirta, 2002). However, scholars also point to the danger of the dominance of evidence in democratic discourse, namely that evidence-based discourse may exclude lay citizens and consolidate the dominance of elites and experts (Boswell, 2014, Fischer, 1993). In this article, we discuss the questions of how the use of evaluations in policy debates may enrich democratic discourse, and how the exclusion of citizens manifests itself. To answer these questions, we draw on a multi-year research project on the use of evaluations in direct-democratic debates in Switzerland in the fields of health and education.¹ The research presented here assembles the results of our work (Schlaufer, 2015, Schlaufer, 2016, Stucki, 2015, Stucki, 2016, Stucki et al., 2016) in one integrated framework, builds on these results and discusses their consequences for democratic discourse and evaluation research. Methodologically, we rely on quantitative and qualitative content

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analyses of government information documents and newspaper articles, as well as on a split-ballot survey.

In a direct-democratic polity, citizens directly decide on policy issues through a majority vote. The issues to be voted on are publicly debated in the media before each vote. Evaluations and other evidence flow into direct-democratic debates and have the potential to inform citizens about the policies in questions (Schlauffer, 2015, Stucki, 2015). The Swiss system allows citizens and stakeholders to actively participate in debates on policy issues that concern them (Sciarini and Tresch, 2014). Hence, the Swiss context provides an excellent case to examine the interplay between the use of evaluations in public debates, the quality of democratic discourse and the participation of lay citizens.

We argue that evaluations may enrich democratic discourse by contributing to the content of the discussion through the provision of policy-relevant information. Second, the political use of evaluations may also improve the process of deliberation by providing justifications and the possibility for public scrutiny of claims. However, our analysis also confirms that lay citizens use evaluations to a lesser extent in the debate to support their arguments, and the use of evaluations to inform a decision decreases with the level of education of citizens.

The article proceeds as follows: The next section introduces the framework on the influence of the use of evaluations on democratic discourse. The methodological section describes the case selection and the procedure of data collection and analysis. Subsequently, the findings are reported and discussed in the light of their implications for democratic discourse and evaluation research.

Evaluations' influence on democratic discourse

Most of the evaluation use literature is based on a rational-technical view of policymaking and focuses on how evaluations directly influence policy outcomes. This

traditional view dismisses the use of evaluations to justify a predetermined position as unfortunate manipulation and politicization of science (Boswell, 2014, p. 346). Our analysis, however, builds on a deliberative approach that treats policymaking as a process of argumentation and a constant struggle between competing discourses (Fischer, 2003, Majone, 1989, Shulock, 1999). A deliberative democratic approach focuses on the communicative processes that lead to public policy decisions and not on the policy outcome itself (Chambers, 2001, p.231). The ideal is not to find an objectively right answer to policy problems, but to adhere to an inclusive and reflective discourse in which positions are justified and scrutinized (Boswell, 2014, p. 346). In this view, the role of evaluations is not to provide readymade policy solutions, but to offer support for argumentation. In the following, argumentation theory and deliberative democratic theory are used to theoretically develop what influence the political use of evaluations may have on democratic discourse.

According to argumentation theory (Dunn, 2012, Toulmin, 1958), arguments contain policy-relevant information, a claim in favor of a policy stance, and a justification for the claim, which relates the policy information to that claim. Evaluation studies may back such a justification with empirical data. Therefore, the political use of evaluations may lead to an increase in arguments that contain a substantial justification (Schlaufer, 2016). In a debate, evaluations may also be used in a more neutral way, that is, not as a support for an argument but simply to add policy-relevant information. By doing so, the use of evaluations may enrich the content of democratic discourse.

Different types of arguments are used in a discourse: Causal arguments focus on the effects of a policy measure (“the policy should be accepted because it has positive outcomes”), ethical arguments refer to moral principles (“the policy should be refused because it is against our religious believe”), and motivational arguments focus on the preference of other people (“the policy should be accepted, since it is wanted by the majority of the population”) (Dunn, 2012, p. 344-345, Stucki, 2016). Since evaluation studies examine

effects of policy measures, it is expected that the use of evaluation studies in argumentation will lead to a discourse that focuses on causal arguments and less reasoning on ethical or motivational grounds.

Furthermore, causal arguments and claims based on evaluations may be verified and refuted by other participants in contrast to claims based on someone's own experience or values that cannot be verified (Esterling, 2011). By subjecting claims to public scrutiny, evaluations may also create a common ground for a policy discussion and increase interactivity of a debate (Boswell, 2014, Schlauffer, 2016).

Figure 1 summarizes the theoretical assumptions as to how the political use of evaluations enriches democratic discourse.

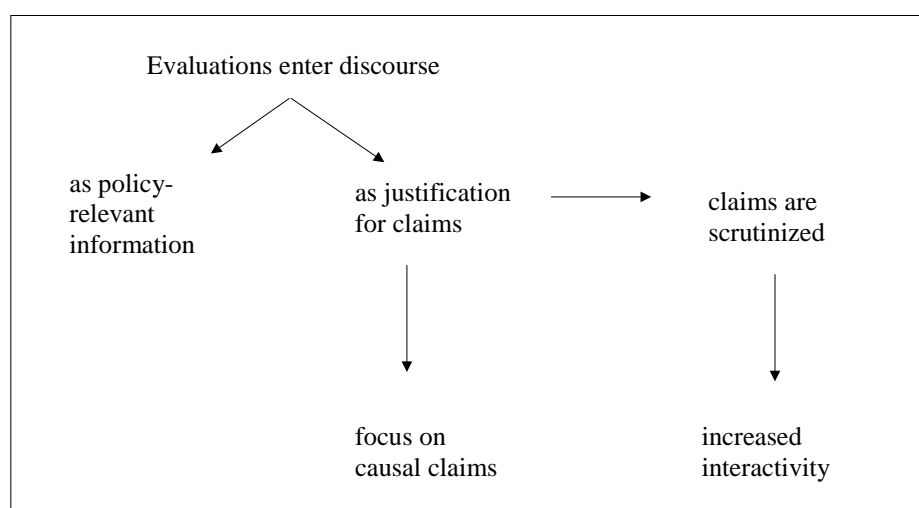


Figure 1. Contribution of evaluations to democratic discourse.

Despite these potential positive effects on discourse, strong emphasis on evidence in a discourse has also a democratic downside, as it can be disempowering for lay citizens (Boswell, 2014). Boswell (2014) points to the danger that evidence “is only made credible in the hands of established experts” (p.362). More precisely, it is to be expected that lay actors

not only use less evaluations in discourse than elite actors but they also tend to rely less on evaluations to scrutinize claims. This raises several questions:

1. What type of information do evaluations add to democratic discourse?
2. How are evaluations used to justify policy stances?
3. How do evaluations foster interactivity?
4. Who introduces evaluations into the debate?
5. Who uses evaluations to get information on public policy?

The next section describes the methodological approach used to empirically answer these questions.

Methodological Approach

Case selection: evaluations in Swiss direct-democratic health and school policy debates

The Swiss political system, characterized by a consensus democracy, strong federalism and direct democracy, does not foster evidence-based policymaking (Rissi and Sager, 2012, Sager and Rissi, 2011, Widmer and Neuenschwander, 2004). However, due to the direct-democratic system, policy decisions are publicly debated before each vote and evidence may be integrated in these public debates (Schlaufer, 2015, Stucki, 2015). Such a setting is ideal to study the use of evidence in democratic discourse, as direct-democratic campaigns are institutionalized public communication events that focus on a specific policy issue (Kriesi, 2012, p.10). In addition, broad participation of lay citizens in these public policy debates may be assumed and are reflected in the large numbers of letters to the editor common in Swiss direct-democratic campaigns (Gerth et al., 2012, p. 123).

We investigate direct-democratic debates in the field of health and education. These policy fields are characterized by a high evaluation activity, not only in Switzerland but also internationally (Balthasar and Rieder, 2009, Davies et al., 2000). As this high evaluation

activity is also likely to lead to a high use of evaluations in direct-democratic debates, we analyze health and education as a most-likely case of evaluation use in debates (Gerring, 2007).

Data

We rely on content analyses and a split-ballot survey to empirically test how evaluations contribute to democratic discourse and how the exclusion of periphery actors manifests itself.

For the content analyses, we included all 221 votes on health and school policy that took place at the national and cantonal levels between 2000 and 2012. We selected the most important information source for voters, namely daily newspapers and the official government information document (Bonfadelli and Friemel, 2012, p. 173-175). The government information document explains the government's stance on the issue, but also informs about opposing positions. More specifically, we included for each vote the governmental information document, as well as all newspaper items that mention the issue of the vote two months prior to each vote. The newspaper items were selected from the newspapers with the highest circulation in the respective canton and from the two major national newspapers. Overall, 10,913 newspaper items and 215 government information booklets were included in the analysis, a total of 11,128 items.

All 11,128 documents were manually coded to capture important characteristics such as type of document or author. In a next step, all items containing a reference to an evaluation study were identified. We defined an evaluation as a study that assesses a policy with the use of social science methods to answer questions posed by policymakers (Cousins and Leithwood, 1986, p. 322). References to other evidence such as statistical or monitoring data, basic research or standardized student assessments were also registered. To do so, we electronically searched the documents using key words related to evaluation (e.g., evaluation, analysis, evidence, experiment). Then, we manually coded the items containing evidence to

register the amount of arguments backed by evaluations and other evidence. An argument is defined as the justification of why a voter should vote for or against a policy issue. For every argument backed by evidence we identified the actor who made the argument and the type of text that contained the argument.

In addition, two separate in-depth analyses were used to examine how evaluations are used in the argumentation. In the health sector, all votes on smoking bans were selected to analyze all arguments used in the campaigns, also those not containing evidence (3,322 arguments in total). In the education sector, all media articles containing evaluations (in total 63), as well as 63 matching newspaper article without evidence were qualitatively analyzed to examine how evaluations are used to justify positions and to foster interactivity of discourse, as well as how other knowledge not based on evidence is used in discourse.

We used quantitative analysis to count the frequency of evidence and evaluation use, as well as to test for differences of evaluation use among authors, sources of arguments and type of documents, using Pearson's χ^2 tests and standardized Pearson residuals. A standardized Pearson residual that exceeds 2 or 3 is a sign of an association in that cell (Agresti, 2013). Intercoder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa and good reliability scores were achieved. All qualitative analysis was done using the method of summary for inductive category formation (Mayring, 2010).

In addition, a split-ballot survey was conducted to analyze the characteristics of voters who use evaluations to get information about the issue of a vote (see also Stucki et al., 2016). The survey took place with 353 students from the University of Bern. Participants were randomly assigned into two groups, one was asked to participate in a hypothetical vote on the introduction of a fat tax at their University canteen, while the other group was only asked to state their opinion on the introduction of a fat tax. Participants were presented with three sets of four fictional media articles and were asked to choose one media article from each set. Each set contained two articles based on evaluation results and two articles based on opinion

pieces. Respondents were allowed to choose three media items from three consecutively presented sets. After reading the media items, participants were asked to vote or to express their opinion on the introduction of a fat tax, respectively. At the end, they were asked to complete a questionnaire. The data was analyzed with logistic regression analysis using a Bayesian approach.

Findings

The findings section follows the research question posed and is organized in two parts. A first part describes the use of evaluations in terms of what information is provided by evaluations and how evaluations are used as justification of policy stances. The second part examines the relationship between evaluation use, interactivity and inclusion of lay actors.

Evaluations as provider of policy-relevant information and justifications

Overall 235 (2.1%) of the 11,128 documents examined contain a reference to an evaluation. When including also other evidence such as research, monitoring or standardized student assessment studies, 649 (5.8%) documents refer to evidence. The use of evaluation studies is significantly lower in the education sector than in the health sector. In the health sector 150 (2.9%) of 5,147 documents contain a reference to an evaluation while in the education sector, only 85 (1.4%) of the 5,981 documents examined contain an evaluation ($\chi^2 = 29.1$ (1), $p < 0.0001$).

In 31 of the documents, evaluations are used to provide policy-relevant information, but not to back a position. In the remaining 204 documents that contain an evaluation, evaluations are used to justify a policy stance. These documents contain a total of 376 arguments that are backed by evaluation results.

An in-depth analysis of all arguments used in all votes on smoking bans demonstrates the relationship between the mode of argumentation and the use of evidence (see also Stucki,

2016). While most of the arguments employed use an ethical mode of reasoning, the share of arguments backed by evidence is the highest among causal arguments, followed by motivational arguments (Table 1). Policy evaluation studies (as well as basic research results) were most frequently used in causal arguments to describe the impacts of smoking bans on health and the economy. Other evidence, namely opinion polls and monitoring reports were used to support motivational arguments, that is, to motivate voters to vote according to the majority's opinion. Hence, arguments backed by evaluations add new information on potential outcomes of the policy measures in question, and they lead discourse away from normative considerations.

Table 1. Relationship between use of evidence and type of argumentation

Type of argument (N=3,322)	Standardized Pearson residuals
Causal (n=1,190)	+ 13.8
Ethical (n=1,805)	- <i>14.0</i>
Motivational (n=234)	+ 6.1
Parallel (n=84)	- 2.5

Note: Standardized Pearson residuals with an above-average use of evidence appear in **bold** print those with a below-average use of evaluations appears in *italics*.

The qualitative content analysis of all evaluations used in newspapers related to school policy votes confirmed that evaluation studies add in the majority of the cases information on the potential outcomes of the policy in question. In 46 (73.0%) of the 63 analyzed newspaper articles containing evaluations, evaluations were used to justify a position in terms of positive outcomes of a policy measure (or the lack thereof). In additional six cases, the evaluation was used to weight potential benefits with costs and in another six cases the evaluation detailed

context factors necessary for successful implementation of the policy measure. Only in five instances, evaluations did not add any policy-relevant information.

In summary, evaluations are in the majority of the cases used to justify a position in terms of the (potential) outcomes of the policy in question. Therefore, the use of evaluations in debates adds policy-relevant information to the content of a debate and improves the process of deliberation by providing justified positions.

Who uses evaluations?

This part first examines who introduces evaluation studies in the debate. Then, it analyzes what characterizes voters who use evaluations to inform themselves about policy issues. Finally, it turns to the question of how evaluations may foster interactivity.

We used different ways of examining who introduces evaluation studies into the debate. First, we examined at the level of the document the relationship between the author of a document and the use of evaluations (Table 2), as well as between the type of document and the use of evaluations (Table 3). Table 2 shows that documents authored by members of the government, the administration and experts exhibit an above-average use of evaluations. By contrast, citizens show a below-average rate of evaluation use.

Table 2. Association between author of a text and the use of evaluations

Author (N=11,128)	Standardized Pearson residuals
Journalist (n=5523)	+ 0.8
Citizens (n=3227)	- 3.2
Parliamentarians and party members (n=1246)	- 1.6
Stakeholder and interest groups (n=827)	- 2.1
Government and administration (n=231)	+ 13.2
Experts (n=47)	+ 3.3
Missing author information (n=27)	

Note: Standardized Pearson residuals with an above-average use of evaluations appear in **bold** print, those with a below-average use of evaluations appears in *italics*.

The high use of evaluative information by the government is confirmed when examining the relationship between type of document and evaluation use (Table 3). The government information document displays high above-average evaluation use. In contrast, letters to the editors that are often used by periphery actors display a below-average use of evidence.

Table 3. Association between type of a text and the use of evaluations

Author (N=11,128)	Standardized Pearson residuals
Newspaper report (n=4,751)	+ 0.6
Letter to the editor (n=4,950)	- 5.9
Opinion piece (n=701)	+ 2.0
Interview (n=297)	+ 3.6
Government information (n=216)	+ 13.6
Information on an event (n=213)	- 2.2

Note: Standardized Pearson residuals with an above-average use of evaluations appear in **bold** print, those with a below-average use of evaluations appears in *italics*.

Third, the analysis at the level of arguments used in the votes on smoking bans also demonstrates a correlation between the source of arguments and the use of evidence (see also Stucki, 2016). Elite actors, that is, experts and members of government and administration, exhibit an above-average use of evidence (Table 4). Besides experts and the government, also journalists use evidence more often than the other actor groups to back their arguments. In contrast, citizens, as well as parliamentarians and party members display a below-average use of evidence in their arguments.

Table 4. Relationship between source of arguments and use of evidence

Source of argument (N=3,322)	Standardized Pearson residuals
Parliamentarians and party members (n=1,141)	- 4.5
Citizen (n=924)	- 6.2
Stakeholder and interest groups (n=723)	+ 1.0
Journalist (n=277)	+ 8.8
Government and administration (n=202)	+ 3.3
Expert (n=55)	+ 10.3

Note: Standardized Pearson residuals with an above-average use of evaluations appear in **bold** print, those with a below-average use of evaluations appears in *italics*.

In contrast, the analysis of which actor group uses own experience in their argumentation conducted in a sample of 126 newspaper articles in the context of school policy votes shows a significant higher use of argumentation in terms of own experience among periphery actors ($\chi^2 = 11.187$ (1), $p < 0.001$). This confirms that lay actors tend to use storytelling as opposed to evidence in their argumentation.

It is assumed that when evaluations are used in public policy argumentation, these arguments are scrutinized and may therefore foster interactivity of a debate. The analysis of all newspaper articles containing evaluations and a matching newspaper article without evidence confirms that newspaper articles containing a reference to an evaluation, also rather contain more than one viewpoint as opposed to articles that do not refer to evidence ($\chi^2 = 22.135$ (1), $p < 0.001$) (see also Schlauffer, 2016). The analysis of newspaper articles that contain an evaluation shows two ways an evaluation may contribute to interactivity: evaluations are used to counter opponents' arguments with empirical evidence, or journalists use evaluations to discuss both opposing viewpoints on the policy measure in question.

Next, we analyze who uses evaluation results to get information on a public policy vote. To do so, we use the results of a split-ballot survey in which participants were asked to choose a source of information about a health issue, the introduction of a fat tax (see also Stucki et al., 2016). 88.1% (156/177) of the experiment participants who were asked to vote

on the introduction of a fat tax, considered evaluation results, while 11.9% (21/177) only considered opinion pieces. When comparing participants who chose evaluation results with those who chose opinion pieces, we find a difference based on education. When only considering participants with a low level of education and keeping all other variables at their mean, 81% (95%-CI 0.54-0.95) preferred information on evaluation results. This share rises to 99% (95%-CI 0.93-1.00) for participants displaying a high level of education. However, in the group that was not asked to vote but only to state an opinion, the level of education did not influence whether evaluation information or opinion pieces were selected.

In summary, our analysis confirms that evaluation results are introduced into democratic discourse by experts and government actors, as well as to a certain degree journalists. In contrast, citizens, and members of parties and parliaments do not display a high use of evaluation results in their argumentation. In the context of a public vote, information based on evaluations is in particular used by highly educated citizens to get information on the public policy issue. The results also confirm that participants in direct-democratic debates use evaluations to scrutinize and refute opposing arguments, which fosters interactivity of discourse.

Discussion and conclusions

When evaluation results are used in debates they may contribute to democratic discourse. The broad aim of this article was to examine whether and how evaluations enrich discourse, and whether and how the use of evaluations excludes periphery actors. The examination of the use of evidence in direct-democratic campaigns in the health and education sector in Switzerland shows that evaluations are infrequently used in direct-democratic discourse. However, when evaluations are used, they not only provide policy-relevant information, but they also offer a substantial justification for claims and positions. Arguments based on evaluations follow a causal mode of reasoning, that is, they argue in

terms of potential positive or negative outcomes of a policy measure in question. Therefore, democratic discourse containing evaluations relies less on normative arguments and more on rational discourse. By increasing public scrutiny of claims, evaluations also lead to higher interactivity of discourse. Overall, this research shows that the political use of evaluations enrich democratic discourse by the provision of information and justification, by a focus on empirically substantiated causal claims, and by enhancing interactivity of discourse.

The examination also confirms that lay citizens tend to rely less on evaluations in their argumentation than government actors and experts do. In addition, information based on evaluations is used in particular by highly educated citizens to get information on issues of a public vote. In contrast, citizens with lower levels of education use evaluations to a lower extent to inform themselves about the policies in question. However, this nonuse of evidence by periphery actors does not mean that lay actors and lay knowledge are excluded from debate. On the contrary, lay voices are very present in direct-democratic discourse in the context of Switzerland. Citizens participate in debates and bring in their own, experienced-based information. The issue is, thus, less one of exclusion but rather one of a separation between elites and lay citizens when it comes to the use of evidence in discourse. Deliberation on evidence seems to be concentrated among elite actors. The engagement of citizens to deliberate on the meaning of evaluation results for policies that concern them remains a challenge.

This raises the question regarding the role governments, experts, but also journalists may play to provide a better understanding of evaluation results, their interpretation, and their relevance to the lives of normal citizens. An active presentation and discussion of evaluation results in the public arena seem important to build a bridge between an evidence-based elite discourse and the lay knowledge and values of citizens concerned. The provision of an arena to openly deliberate those policy solutions that are proposed by evidence is important for the formulation of acceptable policies and hence crucial for democratic governance

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